

Review Essays

The Real Islamic Threat

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Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East
by Fred Halliday. London: I. B. Tauris, 1996. 255pp. £10.95 (pbk).

A Sense of Siege: The Geopolitics of Islam and the West

by Graham E. Fuller and Ian O. Lesser. Boulder, CO, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1995, 193pp. £12.95 (pbk).

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini made an Islamic Revolution, and became known as the idol-smasher, *bot-shekan*. But Iran's Islamic Revolution also smashed illusions. Some people, mostly Iranians, paid the price with their property or lives. Others paid a price in credibility, especially those in the West who professed to know a great deal about Iran and Islam. For all their expertise, many erred in estimating the Revolution's trajectory, both before and after it took power. Consider, for example, the cases of the New Left activist and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analyst.

In early 1979, Fred Halliday published a book on Iran.¹ *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* was a severe critique of the Shah, typical of the analysis then fashionable on the left. The book also included a chapter on the opposition, ignoring Khomeini yet lavishing attention on all forms of 'progressive' opposition, however obscure. In the conclusion – more a postscript, written after the revolution began to boil – Halliday opined that 'the ayatollahs and mullahs on their own can probably not sustain or channel the popular upsurge' (p. 299). But he felt certain others might, and the book ended on this optimistic note: 'It is quite possible that before too long the Iranian people will chase the Pahlavi dictator and his associates from power, will surmount the obstacles in its way, and build a prosperous and socialist Iran' (Halliday, 1979, p. 309).

As it happened, Khomeini did sustain and channel the upsurge, establishing an Islamic state that persecuted the left and sacrificed any hope of prosperity on the altar of Islamic authenticity. The formula worked. Yet experts still doubted Khomeini's staying power. In May 1985, Graham Fuller, National Intelligence Officer for the Near East and South Asia at the CIA, wrote to his director on the situation in Iran: 'In bluntest form, the Khomeini regime is faltering and may be moving toward a moment of truth; we will soon see a struggle for succession'.²

¹ Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979).

² President's Special Review Board, *Report of the President's Special Review Board* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 26 February 1987), pp. B6-B7.

But this would not bring relief: 'The US has almost no cards to play; the USSR has many'. Fuller concluded that the US policy of denying arms to Iran 'may now serve to facilitate *Soviet* interests more than our own', and he urged a 'riskier policy which will at least ensure greater US voice in the unfolding situation'. His proposal: friendly states might be encouraged to sell arms to Iran, to counter Soviet influence over a faltering revolution.

In the end, of course, US arms did change hands. But the government of Iran did not change. Less than five years later, not only had the 'Khomeini regime' survived its founder without a succession struggle, but the Soviet Union, along with its many 'cards', had disappeared altogether.

From two opposite departure points, two students of Iran thus committed very similar errors of underestimation. Islam as a political force was an enigma in the mid-1980s, and it remains one today. It is fascinating, then, to see the former activist and the former agent grapple with the Islamist challenge that refuses to go away. The two are now positioned differently: Halliday is at the London School of Economics, Fuller works at RAND's Washington branch. Each has written a book (Fuller has a co-author, Ian Lesser of RAND), and both books make compelling reading, coming as they do from cautious observers who have tumbled into pitfalls, and who have tried hard to draw the right conclusions. They demonstrate just how far their authors have come – and just how far they may still have to go.

The Siege

The titles of both books anticipate the one argument that they share. Halliday posits 'the myth of confrontation'; Fuller alludes to 'a sense of siege'. The West, they argue, is imagining an Islamic bogey. In the introductions to both books, the authors stake out their disagreements with Samuel Huntington's prophesy of civilisational confrontation between Islam and the West. The very idea of a coherent 'Islam' is an illusion, they write. It is far too fragmented and diverse to pose a threat, and according it too much coherence is liable to prove self-fulfilling.

So how is one to explain the stirrings of protest and the outbursts of violence that punctuate the news from Muslim lands, and make Huntington's claim credible? Fuller's answer is simple. The Muslims, it is true, suffer from 'paranoia' about the West, but even paranoiacs have enemies, and it is *their* sense of siege that is more firmly rooted in reality. Muslims first faced waves of colonisation; then they faced an 'onslaught of modernization'. Now they are buffeted about by everything from consumer culture to cruise missiles. It should come as no surprise that some of them take refuge in religion, and that a few turn religion into a form of resistance. As a result, argues Fuller, one or more Muslim states – probably Arab ones – will become Islamist over the next decade, and nothing can be done to stop it. If the tragic experience of Iran is not to be repeated, the US would do well to learn the art of dialogue and accommodation, and reach out to Islamists both in power and in opposition. These Islamists, although they sound threatening now, will inevitably be 'normalised' through the

actual possession of power. Show them respect, do not attempt to block their way, and they will reach a *modus vivendi* with the West.

By now, there are several books that make this same argument. But their underlying assumptions are highly problematic. The first – the inevitability or near certainty of an Islamist seizure of power in a major Arab state – immediately raises the question of where it will happen. Fuller will not say; instead he offers criteria: it will happen in a place where poverty, corruption, and especially repression, mingle. This seemed a more sustainable argument four or five years ago, when Algeria stood on the brink. Since then, Arab regimes have launched a largely successful counter-offensive, and the repression actually seems to have the opposite effect of that postulated by Fuller. Most recently, Islamism has come closest to power – in democratic Turkey and in chaotic Afghanistan – precisely where states have not had the will or the way to repress it. But the typical Arab state has both, and the fact that even Algeria has not fallen is testament to the tenacity of the Arab security state and the effectiveness of its mechanisms of control.³

The second assumption – that Islamists in power will ‘normalise’ – is more a matter of faith in political science than an observation of political realities. Fuller cannot avoid the two extant examples of Islamism in power, Iran and Sudan. Both undermine his assumption, so he writes them off. ‘The means by which Islamists attain power are critical determinants of the character of a new Islamist regime’, he argues (p. 122). In Iran, Islamists came to power by social revolution, and revolutions foment extremism. In Sudan, Islamists came to power by a coup, and so never knew the ‘normal restraints on the exercise of power’. Iran and Sudan therefore tell us nothing. Allow the Islamists to come to power by the ballot-box, and we will see a very different Islamism.

That this argument can be made in a century when the fiercest totalitarianism took power through the ballot-box demonstrates the poverty of so much Western thinking on Islamism. Power has always been exercised not in the way it has been acquired but in the way it has been conceived. *A Sense of Siege* avoids any attempt to understand how Islamists conceive power. Fuller’s astonishing assertion that Islamism is ‘a non-ideological movement’ is telling. What is Islamism if not a conscious attempt to transform Islam from religion into ideology? People come to these movements for many reasons and with many grievances. The Islamist genius is the translation of this rage into political action, through the medium of an ideology that promises Muslims power in this world. To miss this is to overlook the very point of Islamism.

³ See also Fuller’s latest study, *Algeria: The Next Fundamentalist State?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996). There he argues that the West could live with Islamist rule in Algeria, but he cannot make up his mind if such rule is inevitable. At one point, he asserts that Algeria’s Islamic Salvation Front ‘will almost surely come to power eventually’ (p. 49), elsewhere that it is ‘quite likely to remain a major even if not dominant force in Algerian politics’ (p. 116). The question mark at the end of the study’s title reflects the author’s uncertainty, if not confusion.

Fuller's book, then, rests upon all the soft assumptions of the soft sciences. For some years now, the same ideas have been floating around Washington, in the US State Department's lower rungs and in Congressional hearings. They have not won the day, which is perhaps one reason why the US has been spared a repeat of the Iranian experience. Friendly states know they will enjoy Washington's support against Islamist challengers; secure in that knowledge, they can withstand any storm.

Still, *A Sense of Siege* deserves close reading as a personal testimony to the malaise that has descended on some of America's finest old cold warriors. For Fuller is no garden-variety Islamophile, one of the kind who fill academic departments of Middle Eastern studies. He played the great game to the end; he saw many old certainties collapse with the Soviet Union. Now he is left with serious doubts about the direction of Western democracy (elaborated with much angst in his own book-long refutation of RAND colleague Francis Fukuyama's essay, 'The End of History').⁴ The post-Cold War Fuller is pessimistic about the West's ability and even its right to lead the world. Inevitably, he has argued, it will have to step off its pedestal to mingle as an equal with the teeming masses, or else be pushed off by Third World radicals of every sort. Fuller summarises his bottom line as follows: 'Third World aspirations are going to place increasing demands upon advanced nations for constructing relationships of greater equity and dignity of treatment. Failure by Western states to accommodate them will encourage Third World radicalism in both its nationalist and Islamist expressions' (p. 4).

Given that the Third World (and Islamist states in particular) are themselves plagued by inequity and denial of human dignity, one wonders on what moral foundations this demand rests. But the real craving of the Islamists is not for these intangibles. It is for power, first over other Muslims, and then *vis-à-vis* the West. Followed to its conclusion, then, Fuller's book is not all that different from his Iran memo of 1985. The US should offer Islamists a share of power, in order to placate them. This may not involve clandestine shipments of missiles, but it does mean a conscious acquiescence in eroding the position of the West and its allies in the Muslim world. That this offering will somehow nip 'Third World radicalism' in the bud is itself the last gasp of Third Worldism, preserved here as a fascinating specimen in think-tank amber.

The Confrontation

Fred Halliday stopped genuflecting to Third World idols at least a decade ago. He emerged from the academic culture of the 'progressive' left, which demonstrated a principled gullibility in the lead-up to the Iranian Revolution. From Michel Foucault to Richard Falk, they hailed Khomeini as liberator and saviour. Many of those formed by this experience went on to become apologists for Islamist excess. In that light, Halliday has come a long way, shedding (almost) all illusion and showing open contempt for the post-modernists'

⁴ Graham E. Fuller, *The Democracy Trap: Perils of the Post-Cold War World* (New York: Dutton, 1991).

relativism. This remarkable collection of his own essays is the record of his awakening.

Halliday's seven essays are most concerned with the intellectual debates that have raged across academia, notably on the 1991 Gulf War, human rights and orientalism. Halliday often addresses himself to the left he forsook, refuting its anti-imperialist cant with incisive logic. Nowhere is this more evident than in his essay on the 1991 Gulf War, precision bombing the argument that it was an 'imperialist war'. In other debates, he stakes out what in academic circles would be regarded as a middle position. His core philosophical assumption is that there is nothing exceptional or inscrutable about the Muslim world. It is subject to analysis straight out of the general theoretical toolbox.

This frees Halliday to see Islamism for what it is: not the embodiment of the supposed democratic 'essence' of Islam, but a form of atavism comparable to other atavistic fundamentalisms. It would be a mistake, he writes, to allow 'misplaced guilt and post-modernist confusion' to obscure 'the very real dangers that Islamist movements involve for everyone, not least the dangers for Islamic countries themselves. Policies that deny the equality of men and women, of Muslims and non-Muslims, which legally suppress the rights of the individual, are not matters to which Western Europe, whatever its own failings, can remain indifferent' (p. 130). To look the other way would be to indulge in 'relativist appeasement'. And yes, the West is sometimes guilty of double standards, but only from the vantage point of universalist values – something Islamists adamantly refuse to embrace.

Yet the Islamic 'threat', he argues, is overblown. The Islamic world poses no economic threat to the West; if there is such a threat, 'it is much more likely to come from rising industrial powers in the Far East and Latin America than in the Islamic world' (p. 81). A military threat does not exist – it has not since the Ottomans retreated from Vienna in 1683 – and 'Islam', if there is such a thing, remains too deeply divided to take on the West:

There cannot be a great 'Islamic challenge', not only because the Islamic states are, and will remain, much weaker than those of the West, but also because they do not represent a coherent, internationally constituted alliance (p. 119).

Halliday is rather more concerned with the implications of rising 'anti-Muslimism' around the globe, which is nowhere a coherent ideology, but has nevertheless worked to reinforce the premises of Islamism, creating a vicious circle.

This is a peculiarly northern European take on the question, especially in light of Ian Lesser's recent RAND study on proliferation around the Mediterranean.⁵ Lesser wrote the short 'strategic' chapters in Fuller's book, but he is also the prime author of a more detailed proliferation study whose conclusions, while not

⁵ Ian O. Lesser and Ashley J. Tellis, *Strategic Exposure: Proliferation Around the Mediterranean* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996).

alarmist, are hardly an invitation to complacency. It is all too likely that in the near future, the security environment of the Mediterranean will be transformed by proliferation. Within a decade, all the capitals of southern Europe are liable to be within missile range of the Middle East and North Africa. Lesser's study concludes: 'Vulnerable allies [of the US] may be reluctant to commit forces or even to support US action under some conditions. At a minimum, European cooperation – especially southern European and Turkish cooperation – will come at a higher political and operational price' (p. xii).

This would mean a shift in the existing strategic balance. Arab nationalists tried and failed to achieve it. Now the Islamists openly declare that they intend to accomplish it. This is the real 'Islamic threat': a narrowing of Western options in moments of crisis. Such a narrowing may already have happened in Turkey, where Islamists now share power. The assurances that Islam is too divided, that the Islamists are not ideological, that they can be domesticated, that they are more likely to turn their weapons on one another – all these claims sound suspiciously like the assurances that preceded the Iranian Revolution. One can only pray that Fuller and Halliday have finally got it right. If not, there will be millions of Western hostages next time.

Oslo, Three Years On

Glenn E. Robinson

The Politics of Protest: The Israeli Peace Movement and the Palestinian Intifada
by Reuven Kaminer. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1996. 247pp. £16.95.

Making Peace with the PLO: The Rabin Government's Road to the Oslo Accord
by David Makovsky. Boulder, CO: Westview Press in cooperation with The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996. 239pp. £11.50.

Human Rights in the West Bank and Gaza: Legacy and Politics
by Ilan Peleg. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995. 191pp. £31.50.

The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-development
by Sara Roy. Washington DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995. 304pp. £22.50.

Palestine in Crisis: The Struggle for Peace and Political Independence after Oslo
by Graham Usher. London and East Haven: Pluto Press in association with the Transnational Institute and the Middle East Research and Information Project, 1995. 146pp. £9.95.

When Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shook hands on the White House lawn in September 1993, most observers believed a historic reconciliation between

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